



SHEPHERDING THE FLOCK OF GOD

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO
BECOMING & BEING AN ELDER

BY JAMES T. (TOMMY) SOUTH

Shepherding the Flock of God

A Practical Guide to Becoming & Being an Elder

James T. (Tommy) South

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Acknowledgements & Dedication

Approximately three years ago, Bob Turner of the Sunset Academy of Leadership Training (S.A.L.T.) spoke to a group of ministers in the Richmond, Virginia area on the need for training more and better elders. His presentation struck me not only with the recognition that we face a tremendous leadership shortage in Churches of Christ, but with my own failure to provide training for future elders. As a result of Bob's comments, I developed a training course for shepherds ("Trained for the Kingdom") and presented it at the Glen Allen Church of Christ, where I have ministered for the past 29 years. The outlines for those class sessions form the basis for the chapters that follow, and I am deeply indebted to Bob for his encouragement to compose and develop them. I am also in his debt for graciously consenting to proofread the entire work, which he did in a remarkably short time span, even in the midst of moving from Virginia to Tennessee! Any shortcomings which remain are solely my responsibility, not his.

I am also grateful to all of the men, past and present, who have served as shepherds of the churches where I have preached. Among

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them are giants of faith, but all of them have been men of good will who loved God and His people. I have learned, and continue to learn, much from them.

Among those giants is my friend, brother, and fellow shepherd, Carl Childress, who served for many years as a shepherd of both the Hermitage Road and Glen Allen churches. In so many ways Carl has demonstrated what it means to have a shepherd's heart. He and Gwen have been a blessing to many, and to my family in particular, and it is to them that this book is dedicated with affection and appreciation.

Glen Allen, Virginia

June 27, 2024

A Word to the Reader

Writing a book is a big undertaking, and there has to be a reason for doing it. So as you begin reading, I want to share with you what my purposes have been for writing this material, and what you might hope to get from it and how you might use it.

First, I love the church. I have been preaching for more than fifty years and served as a shepherd for five, and I have seen the church from virtually all sides, both good and bad. There are many things that encourage me about the church and its future. But one disturbing trend is the fact that we are running out of elders, men who will shepherd the church as God intended. We used to take it for granted that a church which had been in existence for any significant length of time would have elders. Now that is no longer the case. In fact, some studies indicate that most Churches of Christ do *not* have elders, and that the average number of elders in churches that do have them is – get ready for it – two. That means that the majority of congregations either do not have elders or are only one funeral away from having none. And where are future elders to

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come from? Many groups of shepherds are aging out, with no one in sight to step in and take their places.

When we ask why things are this way, the only obvious answer can be that we have not been preparing men to be shepherds. Think about it. We assume that people in almost all professions (and even in most relatively unskilled jobs) are trained to some extent. We certainly want them to be, because we know that if they are trained, they are far more likely to provide the kinds of services that we look to them to provide. Yet when it comes to shepherds/elders in the church, most receive no training at all. Most churches would not think of employing an untrained preacher, yet the vast majority of elders are untrained beyond what most Christians are, through worship experiences and Bible classes.

This book is a small step toward trying to rectify that imbalance. My hope is that it will be read by four kinds of people. First, by those already serving as shepherds, to gain increased skills and perhaps improved ways of doing their all-important task. Second, by those considering becoming elders, men who need a deeper understanding of what “eldering” should look like from a biblical point of view. Third, by those conducting training classes in churches, where it could be used as a kind of textbook or training manual. Not that this book has all the answers – it doesn’t even have all the questions. But I pray that it will be a starting point for discussing what shepherds should be and how they should oversee God’s people. Finally, I would hope that Christians who are not elders and never plan to be will read it as well. Why? Because the better understanding we all have of the shepherding role, the better shepherds we will look for and produce. My sense is that one reason for our elder shortage is the sad reality that so many in the churches have no realistic idea of what elders do or how they should do it. Surely we will select better-prepared leaders when we have better-informed followers.

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The guiding principle of this book is allowing the Bible to be our guide in learning the task of shepherding. Much of what we think we know about this often comes more from our congregational traditions than from Scripture, and that needs to change. We need to take a long, hard look at what Scripture says, confident that it does equip us “for every good work,” as Paul claims that it does.

Finally, one thing that sets this book apart from others on this subject is the attempt to discuss aspects of shepherding that are often overlooked. The qualifications we have worked over endlessly. But what about the importance of shepherds having a strong spiritual life? And the importance of maintaining integrity in their leadership? What decisions should elders make, and which should they not make, and what are the criteria for making any decisions? And what about the seriously neglected aspect of church leadership that we call “church discipline”? And, while we all acknowledge the important role of elders’ wives in sharing with them in an effective ministry, when have you encountered a study of the role of these women? I have attempted to address all of these topics, as well as numerous other questions of a practical nature.

Obviously, some of what I will discuss in the following pages is not taken directly from Scripture, but contains large doses of personal opinion and is based on my experiences as both a preacher and a shepherd. I do not expect anyone to accept these at face value. But even when speaking in the realm of opinion, I hope that my comments will serve as a catalyst for more thinking about these subjects. There are undoubtedly others who will have better ideas and clearer thoughts than mine, and if something in the following pages causes those to come to light, I will be more than pleased.

“The saying is trustworthy: if anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.” (1 Timothy 3:1)¹

1. Unless otherwise noted, all Bible quotations are from the English Standard Version.

Chapter 1

The Need for “Faithful Men”

“You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.”

(2 Timothy 2:1-2)

It will come as no surprise to those who know me that I've never been much of a runner. In fact, some of my most painful memories of high school involve being forced into running in track meets as a requirement for playing basketball. I went to a small West Texas high school, and our track coach and basketball coach were the same person. I really wanted to play basketball – and really *didn't* want to run track – but I wasn't given a choice. Needless to say, I had a rather undistinguished career as a runner, although I did make some rather spectacular last-place finishes.¹

1. As a matter of note, my basketball coach, Burl McCoy, later became an elder in the church in my hometown, and was influential in my decision to preach the gospel.

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Although I've never enjoyed running, I have always enjoyed watching relay races. Relays are exciting events, because they involve not only athletic skill and speed, but also teamwork, and it's the teamwork that makes for a successful race. And the most critical part of any relay is *the handoff*. It doesn't matter how fast the athletes run or how elegant their form or how herculean their effort, if they botch even one handoff, it's game over. So they have to transfer the baton from one runner to the other while both are running (hopefully) at top speed so that no momentum is lost. That's how relays are won.

Running With Paul

When Paul wrote 2 Timothy, he knew he had to make a handoff, and he knew he didn't have much time to do it. Toward the end of this, his final letter, he writes, "For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come" (4:6). His fight was near its end, and he had run his part of the race, keeping faith with God all the while. Now it was time for others to take the "baton" (gospel) and keep running. Paul didn't think the gospel would die with him, but he knew that if he did not hand it off smoothly, some drastic things could happen to the church. In the letter he mentions several dangers that he knew lay ahead.

For one thing, he knew that more persecution was coming, and that someone had to be willing to endure it for the sake of the gospel and its continued spread. Paul himself had endured much suffering, just as the Lord had told him he would (Acts 9:15-16), and he now urges Timothy to "share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God" (1:8). He also encourages him to "share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus" and reminds him that soldiers, athletes, and

Burl passed away recently, and I will be forever grateful for his encouragement to preach – even if not for trying to make a runner out of me!

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farmers must keep their focus on their duties in order to obtain the desired outcome (2:3-6). Suffering is a constant theme in this letter, and not only for apostles and evangelists. Paul says in 3:12, “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” So part of the handoff is for Paul to prepare Timothy for what lies ahead – and it isn’t all going to be easy or glorious. And Paul knew that most people couldn’t be relied on to endure it, but would instead turn away from the gospel and the work of spreading it, as some were already doing (1:15).

Paul likewise foresaw that there would arise people who, if not stopped, would embroil the churches in foolish quarrels about nothing of importance, and that such strife would lead to more and more ungodliness (2:14-19). So Timothy’s task was to avoid such nonsense and instead “continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed” (3:14).

It was also obvious to Paul that in “the last days”² people would tend to love all the wrong things – self, money, and pleasure – rather than loving God, and would exhibit “the appearance of godliness” but deny the gospel’s true power (3:1-5). As part of this trend, Paul warns against a time when people (Christians, evidently) would not endure “sound” (literally, “healthy”) teaching, but would instead “accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions” and by so doing turn away from the truth and “wander off into myths” (4:3-4).

Looking into the future, Paul saw that things were not going to be easy for those he was about to leave behind to carry on his work, so he wrote to encourage Timothy to carry on his ministry by contin-

2. “The last days” seldom in the New Testament indicates the very end of time. Rather, it is a designation for the “last age” or final dispensation of God’s dealings with humanity. See Hebrews 1:1-2, 1 Peter 1:20, and Acts 2:17 for examples of this use of this often-misunderstood expression. All of time from Jesus’ first coming to His final appearance makes up “the last days.”

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uing the faithful proclamation of the gospel. If Timothy (and, presumably others) did so, there would be a smooth handoff; if he did not, things could get rough.

Necessary Actions

To facilitate the handoff, Paul gives Timothy two admonitions in 2 Timothy 2:1-2. Both will be necessary for the smooth transition Paul desired, and to ensure that the gospel will be preached and lived faithfully.

First, Paul says in verse 1, “You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus.” Some translations, such as the NIV and KJV, say “be strong.” But the verb is passive: not “be strong,” but “be *made* strong” or “be strengthened.” How? “By the grace that is in Christ Jesus.”

We are so accustomed to speaking of God’s “saving grace” (as expressed, for example, in Ephesians 2:8-10) that we sometimes overlook the fact that there is another dimension – or perhaps another function – of God’s grace: His “sustaining grace.” His grace that makes us able to endure anything Satan can throw at us. His grace that lifts our spirits, that helps us stay on the path of service and faithfulness – a grace needed by every believer in Jesus. Timothy was going to need plenty of that grace if he was to continue the ministry as Paul had done. The beauty of it is, as Paul had learned the hard way, that God’s grace is always sufficient.³ There is no need we will ever have that His grace cannot meet.

Second, in verse 2 Paul urges Timothy, “what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men,⁴ who

3. 2 Corinthians 12:7-10.

4. As noted in the ESV footnote, the word for “men” here is *anthropoi*, which may refer to either men or women. Context must determine the appropriate translation. Both men and women are responsible for handing on the gospel.

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will be able to teach others also.” Timothy doesn’t need to be an innovator or come up with something novel or original; he just needs to hand on what Paul had given to him – the gospel, in all its power and purity.⁵ Paul instructs him to “entrust” the gospel to others. Paul saw the gospel as a treasure to be guarded and carefully preserved by faithfully teaching it. It was a “treasure in jars of clay” (i.e., fallible and weak humans – 2 Corinthians 4:7), but that only makes it all the more imperative that it be preserved and handed on. Another image Paul uses in this regard is the gospel as a “deposit” that had been entrusted to Timothy (1 Timothy 6:20) and which must be “guarded.”

But the treasure/deposit wasn’t for Timothy to keep to himself. It was to be “entrusted” to others, who would in turn pass it on to still others. That unbroken chain of entrusting the message from one person and generation to the next is what has kept the faith going for the past two thousand years. In fact, if you are a follower of Jesus, it means that someone has entrusted the gospel to *you*.

Notice: the treasure couldn’t be handed off to just anybody. Paul isn’t here thinking simply about evangelism; he is thinking about one teacher of God’s truth preparing others to do the same thing. So the treasure must be entrusted to “faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.” Those who are so entrusted must be both “faithful” and “able.”

“Faithful” here does not mean simply “believing.” It goes without saying that Timothy must entrust the gospel to other believers. Rather, they must be *reliable* men, *trustworthy* men, men who can be counted on not to drop the baton but to run their race just as others

5. This explains Paul’s positive use of the term “tradition” (Greek, *paradosis*), a term which refers to that which is handed on from one person (or generation) to another. While the term obviously has negative connotations in such texts as Mark 7:8-9, 16 and Colossians 2:8, Paul sometimes uses it as a synonym for the gospel which he had “handed on” to various churches and individuals. (See 1 Corinthians 11:2, 2 Thessalonians 2:15 and 3:6.)

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have done before them. Likewise they must be “able” to teach others. Not everyone who wants to be a teacher of God’s truth is capable of doing so. In Scripture teaching is described as a “gift,” one that may not at first be obvious but which can be developed – but it clearly isn’t for everyone. A simple willingness to stand in front of a class and teach is not what makes one “able” to teach.⁶ More about that later.

Preachers, or Somebody Else?

By now you may be wondering why, in a book on shepherding, I have chosen to begin by discussing this Scripture, because we have traditionally thought of it in terms of the importance of training preachers of the gospel. And it certainly applies to such training. But it also has a far wider application that we often overlook.

Of course, preachers do have a great responsibility in handing on the gospel. But there are others who share equally in that responsibility – at least, that’s what Scripture says. And those others are primarily the church’s shepherds or elders. When Paul was giving instructions to his apostolic emissary Titus, he said, “This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you” (Titus 1:5). He then lists the requirements for those who would serve in this capacity, including in verse 9: “He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.” In giving similar instructions to Timothy, Paul wrote that “an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, *able to teach...*” (1 Timothy 3:2). And 1 Timothy 5:17 confirms that elders (some, at least) were expected to share in the tasks of both preaching and teaching: “Let

6. See, for example, the cautionary note regarding teachers in James 3:1.

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the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.”⁷ This explains why, in Acts 20 when Paul warned church leaders about the coming of “fierce wolves” who would scatter the sheep with their perverse teachings, he asked to meet – NOT with the preachers in that part of Asia Minor – but with the *elders* of the church in Ephesus. At that meeting he told them to “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for⁸ the church of God, which he purchased with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). Note that Paul’s charge to these elders isn’t about just teaching a class at church, but about being able to instruct the church in healthy doctrine and to correct those who would distort truth, either in a public setting or one-on-one. In order to do this, the shepherd has to know the difference between truth and error and be willing to step up and teach the one and refute the other. In other words, he must be both biblically knowledgeable and able to teach what he knows, as well as willing to do it.

In Ephesians 4:11-14 Paul put it this way:

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.

Notice first of all that “shepherds and teachers” describes not two

7. Since “double honor” obviously means financial support, it is assumed that some elders would serve the church full-time in preaching and teaching, or at least to a significant enough degree that they would require that their incomes be supplemented by the church.

8. The verb *poinaino* literally means “to shepherd, tend to as a shepherd.”

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roles, but one. The construction in Greek makes it clear that Paul is referring to shepherds (elders) in the role of teachers, as indicated by the footnote in ESV: “or, the shepherd-teachers.”⁹

And notice the function of these shepherd-teachers: “to equip the saints for the work of ministry.” Their role is not merely to make decisions for the church or to teach information. It is to *train people how to serve the Lord*.

But Who?

Here’s the big question: Who “equips the equippers”? Who teaches a shepherd how to shepherd? Who trains elders to lead the church in the way it needs to be led? Unfortunately, our history is that we appoint men to these roles without giving them *any* specific training for the enormous task they are undertaking. Yes, they should have learned plenty of Bible from attending worship and Bible classes, since the word “elder” implies maturity and not being a recent convert” (1 Timothy 3:6), but this is not the same as receiving training *specifically to be elders*. Never in the course of worship or general Bible classes would anyone encounter the kind of nuts and bolts aspects of leadership required of elders. Expecting someone to learn how to be an elder from attending worship and Bible classes would be equivalent to expecting a potential pilot to be ready to fly after passing a course in aerodynamics. Is it any wonder that so many struggle as they do after accepting the church’s invitation to be one of their shepherds? Is it any wonder that so many churches struggle as they do, given that they are led by men who have little to no specific training for the job? Surely we can do better than this – and surely the Lord expects us to do better.

9. The NIV creates some confusion in this verse by translating “the pastors and teachers.” Given the modern connotation of the word “pastor,” this is bound to lead to misunderstanding.

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At one point in my university teaching career, I was asked by our program chairman if I would consider teaching a course in World Religions the following semester. My academic speciality is New Testament and Early Christianity, and I have had only one course in World Religions, and that was many years ago. So I felt uneasy about accepting that teaching assignment. On top of that, the course I would be teaching would not be the one that covered Judaism and Christianity, but the one dealing with “eastern” religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, etc.). I quickly declined. The problem was, given the diverse nature of our university, there would have been students in the class with far greater knowledge of the subject matter than I had. Could I have accepted the assignment? Yes. Could I have done a credible job of teaching the basics of these various religions? Possibly. Would it have been an optimal educational experience for the students? Definitely not. Let’s stop asking our shepherds to do a job they are ill prepared to do.

So This Book...

That’s the reason for this book. There are already lots of books on elders available, many of which do a good job of discussing the role of elders in a generalized way. What I mean is, they talk about the qualifications given in Scripture and the possible meanings of each of these, what the various New Testament texts say about the role of shepherds, and about the importance of that role. But I have found very few that actually discuss the kind of hands-on things that elders need to know. For example, when and why should elders meet – or should they? How does a group of elders make sure they are focused on what they should be focused on – shepherding people – and not on doing the work of glorified deacons? What role does decision-making play in being a good shepherd or group of shepherds? And if decision-making is important, how do they go about making sure their decisions are valid ones? How do they

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maintain their integrity and credibility with the congregation so that people gladly follow their lead rather than being suspicious of their motives? What exactly is their role in maintaining unity in the congregation, which is Paul's primary topic in Ephesians 4? And what about their wives and their qualifications and roles?

These are just some of the questions that will be addressed in this study. My hope is that if you are presently serving as an elder, or are being trained to do so, or you are considering serving as a shepherd although untrained, you will find practical guidance for the enormously important task of shepherding God's people. You are one of the "jars of clay" Paul writes about – but even jars of clay can serve an invaluable purpose if properly instructed.

For Love of Elders

Some of the things I say in these chapters will necessarily be critical of the way shepherding is often done. This is necessary, I think, because it would not be possible to suggest corrections to our usual practices without stating plainly what some of those practices are or have been.

But please do not take this as any indication that I do not like elders or that I enjoy being critical of them. During more than a half-century in preaching ministry, I have been blessed to work under the guidance of some of the most Godly men I have ever known, and I thank God for them. They have been a blessing to me personally as well as to my family and the churches where they served. I will mention some of them in the pages that follow, as examples of what great shepherding looks like. This book is dedicated to one of the very best of them. Also, for five years I was privileged to serve as an elder, one of the two to first fill that role when our congregation was getting started. (I exited that role as soon as there were others to replace me; there's nothing wrong with a preacher also

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serving as an elder [1 Timothy 5:17 again], but it wasn’t ideal for me, though it may be for others.) So I know from first-hand experience something of the challenges that elders face, and deeply respect those who accept them.

I also love the church. And there is nothing better for a church than to have the kind of Christ-like leadership that Scripture describes, and nothing more detrimental than to be led by those who are ill-prepared for their roles, or who ignore biblical guidelines for how they should carry them out. With the church of today existing in an environment that is unquestionably hostile to our faith, it is imperative that we have the best shepherds possible, men who will guide us safely through the morass of confusion, immorality, and decadence that surrounds us. Strong men. Capable men. In the words of Paul, “faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.” My hope is that these chapters will be read and discussed among elders in churches, that they will be taught to those who aspire to be elders, and that elders will use them in mentoring the kind of faithful men Paul describes.

It is my prayer that these chapters will help prepare those men. We cannot afford not to have them. We dare not drop the baton!

Chapter 2

What Shepherds Should Be and Do

“And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.” (Acts 14:23)

On the Sunday that we were ordaining¹ new elders at a church where I formerly preached, each of them was asked to make a brief statement to the congregation. Most of them stated that they were honored to be asked to serve as elders and indicated their readiness for the task. But one began by saying, “Since I knew I was about to be made an elder, I thought I ought to look it up and see what an ‘elder’ is.” I wanted to think he was joking, but as he continued, it was evident that he was not. And it causes me to wonder, how many men accept the role of a shepherd in God’s church without a

1. While the term “ordain” is sometimes used in unbiblical ways, it simply means “to appoint,” and it is much better to speak of “ordaining” or “appointing” elders than to speak of “installing” them, as is often done, as though they were pieces of HVAC equipment.

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clear biblical understanding of what that means? How many accept the title, but not the task? How effective can such men be in this all-important role in the kingdom? And what are the prospects for a healthy church if men become its leaders not even understanding clearly what it is they are to be and to do?

I'm anticipating (and hoping) that this book will serve not only as a guide for those who are presently elders, but also as a training tool for those who are about to become so, as well as simply a source of information and encouragement for all Christians about the important task of serving as an elder in the church. That being the case, I think it's a good idea to assume nothing, and to begin with the basics. That requires a study of the terms used to describe elders/shepherds/overseers (I'll explain that terminology shortly), the functions Scripture assigns to them, and the requirements for serving as one. That's a tall order, I know, but I'll try to be succinct but also thorough. Here goes....

What Are They Called?

The New Testament uses three terms interchangeably to refer to elders. The use of this multiple terminology shows that these are not "titles" in the usual sense, but rather *functional descriptions* of who these men² are and what they ought to be.

First is the word "elder," which comes from the Greek word *presbyteros*. Since it is a masculine word, it simply means "an older man." But its New Testament usage suggests that it refers to more than just age. It also refers to experience as a Christian, to maturity,

2. Although I realize that some churches are now ordaining women as elders, the terms used in Scripture invariably indicate males, so no apology is offered for speaking only of men as shepherds of the church. It would be unbiblical to do otherwise. See Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: A Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership* (Lewis & Roth, 1995) chapter 3.

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to someone who has reached a level of spiritual growth where he can be of help to others in doing the same. There were elders in ancient Israel also, and they were the older, respected men to whom others turned for guidance and advice, and whose judgment carried some measure of authority.³ Since the church arose out of a Jewish milieu, it isn't surprising that the early Christians had their elders, too.

For example, Acts 14:23 says that when Paul and Barnabas retraced their steps to visit the churches they had recently established, they "appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting, and they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed." That elders were appointed so early in the history of these churches suggests the importance of having them "in every church."⁴ Consistent with this is Paul's statement that he had left Titus in Crete, "so that you might put what remained into order, and to appoint elders in every town as I directed you... ."

Another New Testament word for this same role is "overseer." This is the English translation of the Greek word *episkopos*, which indicates someone who "watches over" or "oversees" someone or something.⁵ Titus 1:7 uses this term as another way of referring to "elders," indicating that they are not two separate roles, but one.

3. See Exodus 3:16-18, Leviticus 4:15, Mark 7:3, etc.

4. It is sometimes asked how elders could be appointed so soon after hearing and believing the gospel, since Paul writes later than an elder "must not be a recent convert" (1 Timothy 3:6). The answer is that these men probably had been elders already among their fellow Jews and had the qualities that Paul describes in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. They were, as J. W. McGarvey describes them, "the ripest fruits of the Jewish synagogue; and they needed only the additional knowledge which the gospel brought, in order to be models of wisdom and piety for the churches." So, they were not "novices." (*New Commentary on Acts of Apostles*, 1982; Part Third, pp. 50-51. Note: In this volume each "Part" begins with new page numbering, which can be rather confusing to the researcher.)

5. *Episkopos* is sometimes translated as "bishop," but the subsequent use of this word to indicate an official who rules over several congregations makes it an inappropriate choice, since no such functionaries existed in Paul's time.

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This term suggests the elders' role of watching over/watching out for the church and overseeing its life and work, whereas "elder" points to the maturity required in order to oversee.

There is likewise a third term used interchangeably with "elders" and "overseers," and that is "shepherds."⁶ *Poimen* is the ordinary Greek word for one who keeps sheep, and it is appropriate for the role of elders as well, since they are the ones charged with "watching over the souls" of the church (Hebrews 13:17). The shepherding imagery suggests all sorts of aspects of the role of elders, including feeding, tending to the wounded and sick, guiding to appropriate "pastures," etc.⁷

Read carefully 1 Peter 5:1-2, which identifies the function of "elders" as "shepherding" (*poimano*, the verb form of *poimen*), tending the flock of God. Likewise, in Acts 20:17 and 20:28, Paul instructs the "elders" (*presbbyteroi*) of the church in Ephesus to "care for" (*poimano* again) the church of God over which the Holy Spirit has made them "overseers" (*episkopoi*). The presence of all three terms in conjunction with one another to refer to the same group of men shows that the terms are entirely interchangeable, even though each has its own specific connotation. So the "elders" were also the "overseers" and the "shepherds."

Again, this multiple terminology for the same role shows that these should not be thought of as "titles," but rather as descriptions of who these men are and what they are to do. It is significant that no formal titles are attached to them, only descriptive metaphors.

6. Also correctly translated as "pastors," but as in the case of the English word "bishop," the modern use of this word makes it of little use in understanding what the New Testament writers intend to say.

7. See Ezekiel's scathing rebuke of the shepherds of Israel to get a good idea of what a spiritual shepherd ought to be doing (Ezekiel 34:1-6).

Shepherding the Flock of God

Why Not Just One?

Combining all that the New Testament says about elders/shepherds/overseers, it is evident that there was always a plurality of such men in each church that had them. In other words, no church was to be dominated by one man. Other than in those texts which lay out the qualifications for elders, the terms are always plural. Paul and Barnabas appointed “elders” in each church; Titus was to appoint “elders” in every town; Peter exhorted “the elders among you” when writing to the churches of Asia Minor (1 Peter 5:1), etc. Our knowledge of early church history supports this conclusion. Each congregation had a plurality of elders until at least the end of the First Century A.D. “Single-bishop rule,” as it came to be called, did not begin to occur until early in the Second Century, and even then it did not become the norm until considerably later.

That being the case, churches today, if we want to follow the biblical examples, should likewise have a minimum of two elders. Interestingly, we do not know the exact number of elders in any of the churches we read about in the New Testament, so there isn’t a “Scriptural number” that we should strive for.⁸ But unless there are at least two qualified men, churches should not attempt to appoint elders. While the Scriptures never offer a reason for having more than one, the practical implications of it are obvious: it is never healthy for only one person to have all of the leadership “clout” in a church.

So What Do They Do?

8. As a rule of thumb, one shepherd for each 50 members is a good, workable number. The assumption is that a shepherd can reasonably keep track of that many people. Also, when larger churches have only a small number of elders (say, ten for a church of 2000), then they are more likely to function as a board of directors than as a body of shepherds.

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The biblical terminology points us in the direction of what elders/shepherds/overseers should be doing in churches today.

“Elders,” as noted above, suggests older, mature men. In ancient times this would have automatically implied “respected.” That would mean they could be trusted to give wise counsel in Christian living and solid guidance in matters of faith. As we will see later in this study, the New Testament bears out this role for the church’s elders.

“Overseers” is obviously a functional term. As 1 Peter 5:1-4 and Acts 20:28 show, they manage the affairs of the church generally, but specifically they watch out for the spiritual welfare of its members.

For the term “shepherd,” we have the background of John 10:1-18 to guide us.⁹ The spiritual shepherd, like the literal sheep-herder, is one who knows his sheep and is known and trusted by them. He tends to their needs and defends them from “wolves” (those who would cause them harm), as we will discuss later.

From various New Testament texts, we can identify Seven Biblical Functions of Elders:

1. Shepherding, tending to the needs, both spiritual and physical, of individuals in the church and of the body collectively.
2. Teaching, which is required by 1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:9, and Ephesians 4:11.
3. Refuting error. A necessary corollary to teaching and protecting, as indicated in Acts 20:28-29 and Titus 1:9ff.
4. Setting an example of Christian living. This is implied by the qualifications listed in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, and is made explicit in Hebrews 13:7 and 1 Peter 5:3.

9. See Appendix B at the end of this book.

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5. Visiting and praying for the sick. James 5:13-15.

6. Mediating disputes. Acts 15, 1 Corinthians 6:5-6.¹⁰

7. Oversight/management generally. 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13, 1 Timothy 5:17-19.

As you can see, being a shepherd involves undertaking a multifaceted role. Effective elders/shepherds/overseers will not be “specialists” in only one of these, but will need to attend to all of them as they are able. Some will naturally be more suited for particular aspects of the shepherding role than others, but all should work together to see that these functions are accomplished.

What Kind of Men Should They Be?

Two lists of the qualities needed by shepherds are found in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. In addition, 1 Peter 5:1-4 implies their qualities as the apostle instructs his “fellow elders” regarding how they should – and should not – lead the church. I will not comment on all of the qualifications in these texts, since some of them are self-evident and need little, if any explanation. (The meanings of specific terms and various ways they may be translated will be found in Appendix A.) Instead, I would offer the following general observations about these lists:

1. Since the lists in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 are not identical, it is evident that they are not intended to be exhaustive; otherwise, they would contain exactly the same items, which they do not. Rather, they are suggestive of the kinds of characteristics a church should look for in selecting its shepherds, and also provide a guide for self-

10. The latter text does not specifically mention elders, but who would be better suited for mediating a dispute between or among members of the church than their shepherds?

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examination for prospective elders in determining whether or not they are suited to serve in this way.

2. In addition to the lists not being identical and therefore not exhaustive, there are some very important characteristics that are assumed but not mentioned specifically. For example, none of them says “must love God,” “must attend worship,” “must not abuse his family,” and a host of other things. Yet who would want anyone to serve as an elder who does not meet these unstated qualifications? The sad fact is that churches sometimes appoint men who may in some technical sense “meet all the qualifications” contained in these lists, but who are not in any sense Christ-like men due to their temperament, behavior, etc.¹¹ We need to be much wiser than we sometimes are in determining who should and who should not be appointed to oversee the church.¹²

3. These qualities are not so much a checklist as a description of a certain kind of person, an exemplary Christian. This does not mean they should be regarded as optional in any sense, but is simply a recognition that they are pointing us in a certain direction, one that each church will have to flesh out for itself in deciding whom to appoint.

4. It is interesting and important to note that in both of his lists of qualifications, Paul says first of all that they must be “above reproach.” Two things about this: First, “above reproach” does not mean “perfect.” Rather it suggests that a person has no obvious flaws that would rule him out as a potential shepherd, no glaring inconsistencies of character or behavior. While churches should

11. Some even insist that anyone “meeting the qualifications” (meaning only those specific ones Paul lists) *must* be appointed. This reveals a very skewed understanding what qualifies a shepherd must have.

12. In addition to the qualities listed by Paul and Peter, see John 10:1-18, where being a “good shepherd” involves (1) knowing the sheep, (2) being trusted by the sheep, (3) leading by example rather than in an authoritarian manner, and (4) courage. These are discussed at length in Appendix B.

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always look for men of the best possible character, if we insist on perfection, we will never have elders. Second, “above reproach,” since it stands at the head of each list, may be understood as a kind of general requirement, pointing to the specifics that follow. In other words, Paul would be saying, “Above reproach, and here’s what I mean by that... .” In other words, if any of these qualities is lacking, that man is not a suitable candidate and should not be considered.¹³

5. The recurrence of the word “must” in both lists shows that these qualifications are requirements, not merely suggestions. In looking for qualified shepherds, we are not looking for someone who meets some or most of the requirements, not should we ever simply appoint the best available men, even though they do not meet Paul’s qualifications. We are to appoint only those who to some degree meet all of the requirements that Paul says are “necessary,” realizing that various men will possess these qualities in varying degrees. But it is a serious mistake to think we can ignore or overlook any of the “musts” in Paul’s lists. They are there for a reason.

6. There is nothing wrong with desiring to be an overseer. Paul specifically says in 1 Timothy 3:1 that some will “aspire to the office of overseer,” and if so, “he desires a noble task.” So it is impossible that the desire itself is wrong. In fact, it is a shame that more men do *not* desire to serve as shepherds. We should encourage all young men in the church – even pre-teens and teenagers – to aspire to serve God and the church in this way, so that they can plan their lives accordingly and hopefully avoid pitfalls that might disqualify them. So the desire isn’t wrong, but the motive for wanting to lead may be. But Peter’s guidelines in 1 Peter 5:1-4 should help us easily weed out those whose motives are not pure.

7 The desired characteristics involve both personal qualities and

13. The Greek word for “must” is *dei*, which implies a strong (perhaps even a divine) necessity, as when Paul says in Acts 19:21, “I must also see Rome.” The necessity of his getting to Rome guides the action for the rest of the book of Acts.

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family leadership, as well as a good reputation in the community (1 Timothy 3:7). It is unwise to ignore any of these areas of a man's life. If there is a serious deficiency (i.e., he is not "above reproach") in any of these areas, it could spell disaster down the road, not only for the individual but for the church as a whole.

8. Notice that none of these qualifications says anything about financial success, business experience, or standing in the community (other than having a good reputation). Some believe that only those who are business owners or those who are financially affluent should be elders, but this is a serious mistake. There are many men who work at humble occupations, never accumulate any of the luxuries that many aspire to, and are not influential community leaders, but who are Godly, spiritually-minded, Christ-like, and servant-hearted who would make outstanding shepherds and who can relate wonderfully to the struggles of ordinary Christians. But if we follow worldly "qualifications" of our own devising, we will deprive such men of ever leading the church, and this we have no right to do.

It is clear that Paul sets a high bar for the church's shepherds. But when you consider their responsibilities, it is not at all surprising. In order for God's church to be what He desires it to be, it must have men who lead quality lives and who have proven experience in serving Christ and others. Nothing else will do!

See APPENDIX A for more about the elder's qualities and roles.